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I am a Writer: Reflections on the National Writing Project Annual Meeting in Minneapolis

*Dana Amdahl (ISI 2014)
Albany Senior High School*

The National Writing Project Annual Meeting in November gave me a lot to digest. Months later, I am still thinking about the gamification of language arts classes, democratic writing assessments, and seeing the practice of yoga as a metaphor for teaching. I was inspired to embrace, rather than dread, the challenge of hacking my composition classes of thirty and twenty-eight students, and I was thrilled to sit with my MWP pals at the plenary session. My time with educators from around the country was engaging and energizing, but it was the writing marathon that made the most lasting impact on my teaching this year.

About fifty writers gathered at the Hilton to join loosely organized writing groups and embark on a morning of writing in downtown Minneapolis. A writing marathon, we were told, is simple:

1. Say to each other "I am a writer"
2. Walk to some pausing point
3. Write for an agreed upon period of time
4. Share writing with your group
5. Say only "thank you" in response to the reader
6. Repeat



Writing marathoners



Michelle Shaw (ISI 2008) sets up the Writing Marathon

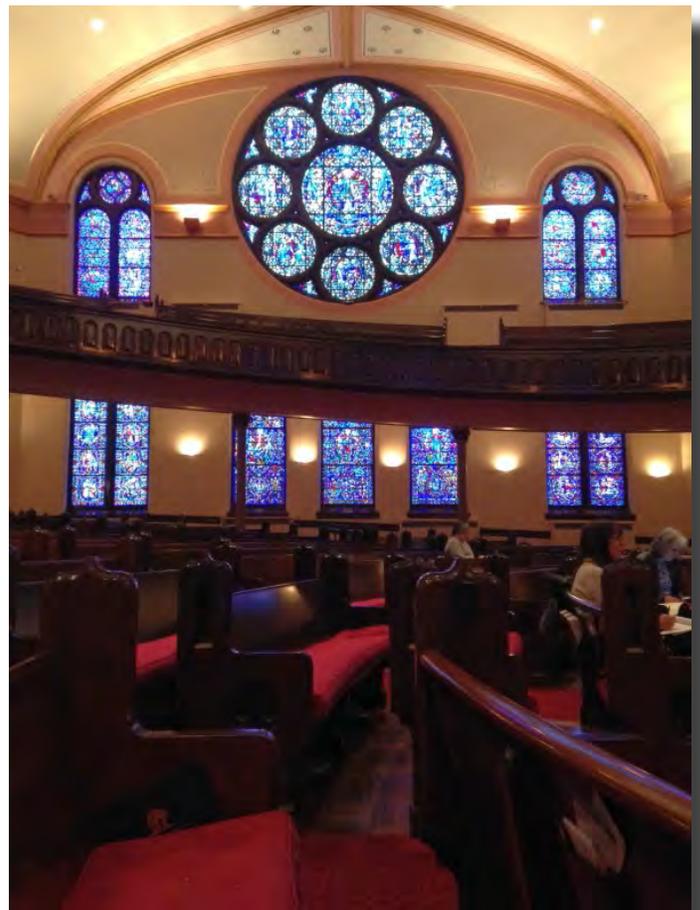
I was nervous. Walking and chatting with strangers was no problem; sharing my writing with strangers was daunting. Surprisingly, it was the first step that gave me the most trepidation. I would have to turn to my marathon partners and say, “I am a writer.” Could I say that without looking abashed? Naming myself a writer felt presumptuous. Yes, I have a daily writing routine and my job requires myriad writing tasks and I teach composition to high school students, but does that make me a writer?

I did it, though. I said, “I am a writer.” I wrote in fifteen-minute chunks at some lovely landmarks in Minneapolis; I shared my writing with interesting people; I said thank you. It all worked out just as the marathon organizers predicted. By the end of the writing marathon, the whole process began to feel authentic, and I wanted to do it again. I believed I was a writer.

My experiences on that blustery Friday morning in November continue to influence my teaching. First, I was a beginner again, self-conscious and uncertain just like my students. I was uncomfortable and wanted to resist the process, but I stuck with the process and in the end found it fruitful. It was one of those ordinary epiphanies we have as teachers—the “ah ha” moment we probably should have seen coming. Of course I should trust the process. How many times have I said that to students?

Finally, though I haven’t yet sent my students on a writing marathon, some of our writing days begin with “I am a writer,” and end with “Thank you.” I think they sit a little taller and smile a little bigger on those days. I think they believe they are writers.

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A majestic place to write

MWP Represented at the National Writing Project Annual Meeting in November



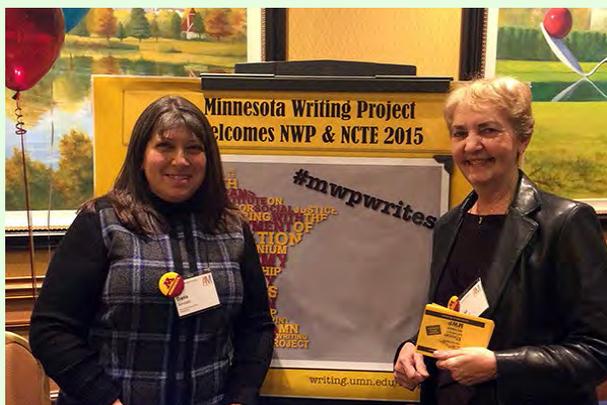
Muriel Thompson prepares to welcome the National Writing Project audience to Minneapolis



TCs from Norway and Minnesota present together at NCTE



MWP TCs cheer on Muriel at the NWP Opening Meeting



Dana Amdahl and Muriel Thompson pose in front of the MWP booth at the NWP Annual Meeting



MWP TCs work at the NWP booth during NCTE

In Memoriam: Remembering Mary Beth Blegen

Muriel Thompson, MWP Director

On January 25, 2016, MWP lost a friend and educational champion. Mary Beth Blegen, or as I affectionately called her, MB, participated in our very first Invitational Summer Institute in 1991. Our connection remained strong as she took on a leadership role in our project and went on to be honored as the 1995 Minnesota Teacher of the Year and then the 1996 National Teacher of the Year.

In the [National Teacher of the Year 1996 Rose Garden ceremony](#), President Clinton shared, “Mary Beth likes to say, ‘Good teaching changes lives.’ She has changed countless lives in 30 years of teaching, and I am proud that she is here as a symbol of all the good that America’s teachers do every day all across America” (Teacher of the Year, 1996). As her son Mark reflected, “She was also so humble. She would never tell anyone she was NTOY. She would say, ‘I’m Mary Beth; now tell me about you” ([Star Tribune, 2/4/2016](#)).

As news of her illness and death spread, countless tributes from former students and colleagues flooded in, from websites to newspapers, sharing memories of her influence. Here is an excerpt from Nancy Flanagan’s “So Normal It Hurts,” shared February 6th on her blog *Teacher in a Strange Land*:

The first time I met Mary Beth, she was entertaining a roomful of teachers determined to get the US Department of Education to LISTEN TO US. Show, don’t tell, she said—and launched into a story about making Civil War battles come alive. Her imaginary demonstration involved spam and pineapple juice standing in for ramparts and troops. We were enthralled. See? she said—that’s how you make the learning stick. Let’s use it on policymakers!

Perusing archival MWP newsletters, I came across an editorial she wrote, “Life Can Seem So Very Fragile,” upon learning of the sudden death of MaDonna Leenay, ISI ’92 (Winter 1993). In her own words:

The fall rains soaked the leaves making them stick to the roads and sidewalks. The trees shed those leaves in the piercing wind a fall day. . . . Walking around the lake the day after receiving the letter, I scuffled through a pile of wet leaves and felt the cold air on my cheeks. The wind had died down some and the forecasters were talking about the return of the sun. I thought about MaDonna. I looked at everything harder that day. ... I tried to say a few more, “I appreciate you” to people around me. MaDonna’s death can’t be explained. But maybe the rest of us can live life a little differently because we have yet another reminder of just how fragile all of this is. And so we journey on—sad, but mindful of her words.

Mary Beth leaves behind countless friends, colleagues, and her loving family: son Mark (Kristin), daughters Kristy (Dan) Grigsby, Sarah (Nick) LaBelle, and the “Magnificent Seven”—her grandchildren.

If you would like to contribute to an MWP scholarship in Mary Beth’s honor, you can [make a donation online](#) or it send to MWP, 10 Nicholson Hall, 216 Pillsbury Drive SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455.



Photo of Mary Beth Blegen from the [Worthington Daily Globe](#)

Reflections on the National Council of Teachers of English Convention in Minneapolis

Sherri Larson (ISI 2007)

President, Minnesota Council of Teachers of English

At the National Council of Teachers of English convention in Minneapolis in November, I was honored to welcome the group at our initial gathering.

I had never spoken from a stage that big; I had never had my face on a jumbo-tron (or two!). I tried not to think about Chelsea Clinton speaking shortly after my remarks. With just two days of preparation, I knew not to draw on my own wit. Instead, I turned to the wisdom of a few famous Minnesotans. Those same words guide my response to the energizing and insightful convention.

“It is lonely and cold at the top. Lonely and cold.” Judy Garland

That November day, it certainly was cold, but we were not lonely. My “Minnesota Nice” volunteer shirt could have said “Minnesota Pride,” so honored was I to be there along with over 1,000 other Minnesota teachers. The compact convention center space made sessions easy to attend, and the skyways bustled with attendees avoiding the wintery winds. With so many good food options just down the street, our friends from afar could not have been more warmly welcomed.

“No problem is too big to run away from.” Charles Schulz

I still puzzle over the grammar of this, but I see it this way: Of course we could run away from the immense responsibility of teaching. Of course we could seek jobs that end each afternoon without lingering into evenings and weekends. We could pursue positions with fewer uncontrollable variables. But we don't run away. Instead, we run to places of support and encouragement. We want to hear “What Teachers Make” by Taylor Mali one more time. We want to encourage students to answer Chelsea Clinton's question, “What will YOU do?” We want to be moved by the courage of Alison Bechdel to share her life and experience through word and image. We want to help Dave Eggers reach students through more pirate shops or through Minneapolis' **Mid-Century Oceanographic Institute**. We might “run away” to refuel and refocus, but we return, renewed and invigorated. This problem not too big—not for teachers.

“Inspiration is hard to come by. You have to take it where you find it.” Bob Dylan

The convention unleashed plenty of inspiration in Minneapolis. My biggest takeaway, as a teacher of writing to senior high students, was when Kelly Gallagher showed a picture of Nancie Atwell receiving the “Best Writing Teacher in the Universe” award. (It was called that, wasn't it?) Mr. Gallagher reminded us in the crowded auditorium: Nancie Atwell didn't and doesn't grade student writing. The best-writing-teacher-ever knows writing is a process—a mind-bending, world-changing, idea-expanding, perspective-altering activity. When teachers admit this is “un-grade-able,” we not only free up our Sunday afternoons, but we give students permission to grow, to learn, to develop. That's authentic assessment.

“It feels like anything can happen.” Prince

In the “Christmas-every-day” expanse of the exhibit hall, there were countless generous spirits bearing gifts for the



Representing MCTE, Sherri Larson welcomes NCTE to Minneapolis.

challenges of the classroom. Scholastic handed out great black and red bags on which was printed, “Open a World of Possible.” We should, shouldn't we? This world of possible is open all around us. The book by this name is full of essays inspirational enough to bring you through a school year of Sunday night blues or to help you burst from midwinter darkness into the newness of spring.

“Thank you, God, for this good life. Forgive us if we do not love it enough.” Garrison Keillor

This is a good life, indeed. It's an honor and privilege to stand alongside, to lead, to follow, to learn, to explore. It is good to stand on the shoulders of past and present writers and readers to share our stories. We cannot love our role as educators and world-changers enough, but we can try.

I have great gratitude for the national and state organizers, for the “Minnesota Nice” volunteer crew who made it all happen, for the inspiring speakers, and for the generous vendors. I am thankful most for the presenters who prepared and shared their classroom experiences with the sincere hope that others might glean a good tip, a new idea, a valuable insight, or an empathetic word. We are in this together, changing and improving our world—discovering its possibilities—one word at a time.



Sherri Larson, Charon Tierney, Elizabeth Erdmann, and Scott Hall, all MCTE board members, planning their NCTE sessions

In the Flow

Merry Meltz Holloway (ISI 2013)
Saint Paul Public Schools

I wrote a letter two weeks ago. That seems a strange way to begin this piece, and in the spirit of transparency I suppose I should admit that I didn't actually take a pen and write in longhand script on a piece of paper. What I did was compose a quick email to our two state senators asking for their support of the SEED program and the National Writing Project in their fiscal year appropriations bill. That little drop of effort on my part resulted in a ripple of replies, and a request for this short piece.

Within my letter, I mentioned that I was a 2013 Minnesota Writing Project participant and therefore am now part of a larger network. MWP professional development is of the highest quality I have ever received in 25 years as an educator, but for me it was like the Lake Itasca headwaters of our wondrous Mississippi River—it was merely the beginning of other opportunities and adventures!

Because of the 2013 Summer Invitational, I regularly receive email invitations to other workshops and seminars. In summer 2014, I participated with a colleague, Maureen Mahoney (ISI 2015), in an amazing satellite **seminar in Montana**, *Worlds Apart but Not Strangers*. This seminar specifically addresses the Holocaust and American Indian genocides, and is in partnership with the **Memorial Library/Olga Lengyel Institute for Holocaust Studies and Human Rights** in New York.

The very act of finding our way to Montana was an adventure. We knew we couldn't drive the distance ourselves, and flights were pricey. So we attempted to figure out train and bus travel. Montana's a really big place and Amtrak rolls through it, but does so only in the northern part of the state. We'd have arrived somewhere at 2:00 am and still have to rent a car to drive several hours south to Missoula, in the dead of night in unfamiliar Big Sky Country. And due to the North Dakota oil industry, there were no Greyhound or Jefferson bus seats available; it seems all the oil workers were riding the buses that would take us to Montana even though they were getting off in North Dakota!

We finally settled on a Frontier airlines flight and happily (but naively) paid our own way. We arrived in Missoula at about 10:00 pm and took a cab to the dorm. After a few nervous minutes waiting outside at 11:00 pm and ringing various buzzers, we were finally able to enter the building. The morning greeted us with what Montana is named for: mountains! They seemed to be in our dormitory backyard. I looked out my window the first morning and saw my initial "M" looking back. I was amazed to see a narrow rivulet of people moving on the mountainside. They looked pretty tiny, but there they were! Turns out, the schools in the area paint their initials on the mountainsides, and paths and switchbacks are created for walkers and runners to scale up and down. I decided that first morning to investigate this activity and, if possible, hike my way up to that "M" before I left Missoula!

The week of seminar activities was incredible, to say the least. We experienced the bonding that always happens with Writing Project members, who quickly feel as if they've known each other for years instead of only hours or a few days. We traveled, literally and figuratively, to the lands of Montana's Indian tribes and its Jewish community, Har Shalom—Mountain of Peace. We wrote, cried, walked, talked, read, listened, worshiped, ate, sang, and danced. Maureen and I left Montana full in our minds, full in our hearts, full of ideas, and, quite literally, laden with the bounty of Montana's Indian Education for All materials. (So much so, that our luggage was way over the weight limit—our "free" materials cost us \$75 to bring home!)

I did climb that mountainside, pausing to rest at each bench provided (and admittedly sneering some-



Merry Meltz Holloway

what at the joggers who breezed by me with nary a pant of breath). When I reached the painted letter I jokingly took a cell phone picture and texted my daughters, “Here I ‘M!’” Maureen and I liked Missoula so much that we went back for Montana’s version of the Education Association conference in October, taking another teacher with us. This time, we asked for professional development funding and travel expenses from our district!

Maureen and I are now in the process of developing a satellite seminar for our state, tentatively titled *The Holocaust and Minnesota’s Own Genocide: The Dakota Exile*. This seminar will have its inaugural session in summer of 2017 on the University of Minnesota campus.

In preparation to lead our satellite, I attended the Memorial Library’s **twelve-day summer seminar** in 2015. No complicated travel arrangements there. The Memorial Library asks for your preferences of dates, times, and choice of airline and takes care of flights for you. Dorm rooms at Columbia University are paid for; subway and bus transportation is provided, as are most meals. The Memorial Library “loves . . . teachers” and is lavish with its treatment of seminar participants.

The days were full of well-planned professional development around the teaching of the Holocaust, but also balanced with a variety of activities to refresh our spirits and keep us connected to the larger world around us. We saw *Amateur Night* at the Apollo, walked across the Brooklyn Bridge, went to Coney Island, sailed on a yacht in the New York harbor, and celebrated Shabbat on the day the same-sex marriage amendment was legalized by the Supreme Court. Again, the participants bonded quickly with each other and the fantastic group of people who are the Memorial Library.

My time in New York was as much a time of personal discovery as of professional growth. I came away with increased confidence in my educational role, a greater sense of myself, and the confidence to reclaim my original family names following a divorce. I have continued to be, and feel, supported by my MWP directors and members, and all of the wonderful people in New York. My colleague Maureen will be attending the Memorial Library summer seminar this year, and I will be joining her there in early July for their **Leadership Institute**.

Any major river system has lots of little tributaries flowing in and out of it, and interspersed with these major seminar events are various other experiences. I began pursuing a **Teaching Writing and Critical Literacy Certificate**. I’ve been to MWP Saturday Sessions when the timing and the topic fit my work. Maureen and I attended the NWP conference right here in Minneapolis this past November and were delighted to meet up with some of our Montana and New York friends.

Our work in an elementary/middle school setting has been enriched greatly by the Minnesota and National Writing Projects, the Memorial Library, and the Holocaust Educators Network. We are honored and grateful to be in the flow of such a powerful stream of teachers and writers. If you are new to the Writing Project network, wade in!



The “M” on the mountain

Minnesota Writing Project Offers an Open Institute

Writing Process and Thematic Inquiry: Writing for Social Justice

3 Credits

Facilitated by Anne Beach and Steph Rollag Yoon



WHO?

Teachers in all

- Grade levels
- Content areas
- Experience levels

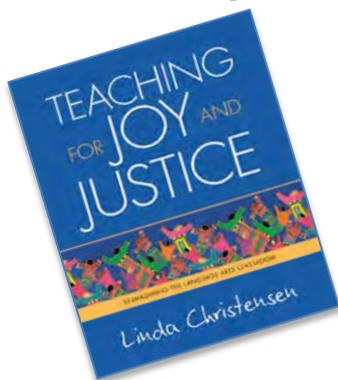
We encourage experienced social justice educators and those new to the theme to join us! Past Invitational Summer and Open Institute participants are welcome, as are both degree and non-degree seeking students.

WHEN?

Tuesday–Friday, June 14–17;
Monday, June 20; Tuesday, June 21;
and Friday, June 24
9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

WHERE?

Nicholson Hall
University of Minnesota
Minneapolis East Bank Campus



WRITING

You will reflect on your own writing processes as you write, share your writing, and participate in a community of writers. Writing groups will meet several times during the week.

TEACHING

You will consider the theory and practice of writing instruction that helps students achieve their potential as writers and change agents.

LEARNING

You will examine a current literacy issue related to the course theme: Writing for Social Justice. Course texts include Linda Christensen's *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up* and *Teaching for Joy and Justice*.

Aspects of inquiry might include:

- Exploring the connection between personal and social justice writing
- Taking action through writing
- Examining a variety of genres
- Bringing social justice topics into the writing process
- Assessing social justice writing
- Investigating digital writing options

“If we intend to create citizens of the world, as most school districts claim in their mission statements, then we need to teach students how to use their knowledge to create change.”

—Linda Christensen, *Teaching for Joy and Justice*

For more information on how to register, contact Steph at roll0226@umn.edu

Announcements & Upcoming Events

Wing Young Huie to Visit MWP in June 2016

Local artist Wing Young Huie will be the guest presenter at this year's retreat for the 26th Annual Invitational Summer Institute on the evening of Wednesday, June 22nd, 2016. Wing has been a celebrated photographer for over 30 years, exploring a variety of social issues locally and internationally. He has also been an active teaching artist, partnering with local schools and community projects. [See Wing's website for more information.](#)



Interested in attending Wing's presentation on June 22nd? Email Steph at rollo226@umn.edu.

SAVE THE DATE: Fall Workshop: October 1, 2016

Please mark your calendars for our annual fall workshop, to be held on Saturday, October 1, 2016. Watch for details to follow.

Molly Vasich, MWP, and TruArtSpeaks Earn LRNG Grant!

We are excited to share that MWP TC Molly Vasich (ISI 2015) and MWP developed a project that is recognized as one of eleven [2015 LRNG Innovation Challenge Grant](#) recipients.



In this project, Molly and her students will collaborate with the Minnesota Writing Project, TruArtSpeaks, and the Walker Art Center during a semester course titled "Black Voices." Moving fluidly between the high school campus and local art space, this collaboration will meet the interests of students, provide equitable access to relevant coursework for students of color, and provide a space for students to develop their own voices in dialogue with contemporary African American texts and issues. We are looking forward to seeing this project unfold throughout the 2016-2017 school year.

Kimberly Colbert's Piece, "Where Discipline and Racial Equity Intersect," Featured in American Educator

Kimberly Colbert's (ISI 2010) essay, "Where Discipline and Racial Equity Intersect," was featured in the Winter 2015-2016 issue of *American Educator*. [You can read the full article here.](#)



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